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US Olympic and Paralympic Committee Won't Discipline Athletes for Social Justice Protests at Games  
by [Mary F.](#)

The Team USA Council on Racial and Social Justice, an organization consisting of US athletes and Olympic sports stakeholders, has urged the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) to allow social justice and human rights protests by athletes at the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The USOPC on Thursday expressed its support for the Team USA Council on Racial and Social Justice's [recommendation](#) to "end the prohibition of peaceful demonstrations by team members at the Olympic and Paralympic Games," amending its charter to allow social justice and human rights protests by Olympic athletes.

"The USOPC values the voices of Team USA athletes and believes that their right to advocate for racial and social justice, and be a positive force for change, absolutely aligns with the fundamental values of equality that define Team USA and the Olympic and Paralympic movements," USOPC CEO Sarah Hirshland wrote in a statement accompanying the release. After the brutal police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the social unrest that ensued, the USOPC established a group to study Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, a controversial provision that doesn't allow for protests or demonstrations because sport is ["neutral and must be separate from political, religious or any other type of interference."](#)

Specifically, [Rule 50 states](#): "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."

However, the Team USA Council on Racial and Social Justice has also argued that "hate speech, racist propaganda and discriminatory remarks" that aim to eliminate the rights of marginalized populations should not be considered examples of ethical speech in the event that Rule 50 is changed.

"The silencing of athletes during the Games is in stark contrast to the importance of recognizing participants in the Games as humans first and athletes second. Prohibiting athletes to freely express their views during the Games, particularly those from historically underrepresented and minoritized groups, contributes to the dehumanization of athletes that is at odds with key Olympic and Paralympic values," the council [said in a Thursday statement](#).

The Team USA Council on Racial and Social Justice has also called on both the International Olympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee to recognize that human rights and social justice initiatives should not be viewed as "divisive disruptions."

The USOPC's decision now puts it at odds with the International Olympic Committee, which still bars athletes from protesting in the field of play under Rule 50. The decision is also a large shift in the USOPC's organizational culture. Last year, the body [reprimanded two American athletes](#) for protesting racial inequality at the Pan American Games.

The 2020 Olympic Games, slated to take place in Tokyo, Japan, have been postponed to July 23, 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Ellen DeGeneres Says She Has Tested Positive for COVID-19  
by [Mary F.](#)

Ellen DeGeneres is an American comedian, actress and television host best known for starring in the sitcom "Ellen" from 1994 to 1998 and for her syndicated TV talk show, "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," which has been on air since 2003.

In a statement posted to Twitter Thursday, DeGeneres revealed that she had tested positive for COVID-19.

"I want to let you all know that I tested positive for COVID-19," DeGeneres wrote.

"Fortunately, I'm feeling fine right now. Anyone who has been in close contact with me has been notified, and I am following all proper CDC [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines. I'll see you all again after the holidays. Please stay healthy and safe," she added.

Telepictures, the production company behind "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," also [revealed to CNN](#) Thursday that it has halted filming of the program until January, even though the show went back into production with safety precautions in September.

The shutdown comes after the show's ratings were doing well due to its "12 Days of Giveaways" series after [suffering from low ratings](#) in the wake of scandals involving alleged racism and sexual harassment among staff. According to [Variety](#), the show had its highest rating since May during the week ending November 29.

The show's 18th season began on September 21 after it had been embroiled in months of controversy.

In August, three [top producers were fired](#) amid allegations of misconduct and sexual harassment.

During the spring pandemic shutdown, the show's staffers also said that they had [not received written communication](#) about their working hours or pay from producers for over a month. When they were eventually contacted by production executives, crew members said were told they would be receiving a 60% reduction in pay while the show continued to air.

During the summer, DeGeneres herself also faced accusations that she contributes to a toxic workplace environment and is not as nice as her on-screen persona suggests.

"I take that very seriously and I want to say I am so sorry to the people who were affected," the host said in her monologue at the start of her talk show's Season 18 premiere, apologizing for her actions, [Mercury News reported](#). "I know that I'm in a position of privilege and power, and I realize that with that comes responsibility, and I take responsibility for what happens at my show."



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US Company Posts Recall After Erectile Dysfunction and Antidepressant Drugs Accidentally Swapped  
by [Mary F.](#)

US pharmaceutical company AvKARE, based in Pulaski, Tennessee, produces a variety of medications, including sildenafil, which is used to treat erectile dysfunction, and trazodone, an antidepressant and sedative.

On Thursday, AvKARE announced that it would be voluntarily recalling recent lots of sildenafil and trazodone because they were inadvertently mixed up during bottling.

"These products have been recalled due to a product mix-up of the listed two separate products inadvertently packaged together during bottling at a 3rd party facility," the company [said in a release](#) on the US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) website. However, the company did not explicitly name the third-party bottling facility where the error occurred.

Specifically, the medications being recalled are 100-milligram tablets of sildenafil with a lot number of 36884 and an expiration date of March 2022; and 100-milligram tablets of trazodone hydrochloride with a lot number of 36783 and an expiration date of June 2022.

The affected lots were "distributed to our distributors and wholesalers, and then further distributed nationwide," AvKARE noted.

According to the release, unintentional consumption of sildenafil "may pose serious health risks to consumers with underlying medical issues," especially since the medication can interact with nitrates found in some prescription drugs, lowering blood pressure to "dangerous levels."

Those with diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease often take medications containing nitrates. In addition, the unintended consumption of trazodone can lead to adverse health conditions such as sedation, dizziness, constipation and blurred vision.

"These adverse events may be more concerning in elderly patients due to a subsequent increased risk for falls and driving impairment," the release noted.

Thus far, there have not been any reports of adverse incidents connected to the recall, according to the company.

"AvKARE has notified its distributors and customers and is arranging for return of all recalled product of the listed lots," the company added in its release.

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Fact Checker's Delight - Political Cartoon

The Trump administration is no stranger to the red ink of fact checkers or even criticism from snarky, eagle-eyed netizens quick to bash the commander-in-chief over misleading claims. The

administration's offenses became so repetitive early on in the presidency that many outlets created "fact-check" sections to track all the false claims.

US President Donald Trump was met with widespread backlash on social media Wednesday after he made yet another false claim about US elections, particularly that no other presidential candidate had won Ohio and Florida and still managed to lose the election.

Trump's statement, evidently meant to bolster baseless allegations of voter fraud, was immediately [rejected by the masses](#), who were quick to give The Donald a history lesson on the 1960 presidential election that saw then-Vice President Richard Nixon lose out on his first White House bid to then-junior US Sen. John F. Kennedy (D-MA) despite winning Ohio and Florida. Voter fraud claims did come up amid the 1960 election; however, they never quite reached the extent of the current allegations by Trump.

Kennedy held the presidency from January 1961 until his assassination in November 1963. Although Nixon later managed to win the presidency in the 1968 election, his administration was riddled with issues, as the [infamous Watergate scandal](#) and his subsequent resignation would prove.

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Pentagon Considers Halting Support for CIA's Counterterrorism Missions - Report  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The partnership between the US Department of Defense (DoD) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has stood for decades and often involves Pentagon officials offering a variety of support, including logistics and transportation, to the spy agency.

Citing sources familiar with the matter, [ABC News reported Thursday](#) that the DoD is considering the possibility of ending the majority of the Pentagon's military support to the CIA by January 5, 2021.

It's reported that acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller recently addressed a letter to CIA Director Gina Haspel, explaining that the longstanding agreement was under review as the department considered turning its focus elsewhere.

Military outlet [Defense One was the first to report](#) the development late Wednesday, and indicated that the move was largely based on the idea of shifting Pentagon personnel "detailed" to the CIA toward "missions related to competition with Russia and China, rather than counterterrorism."

With little details available, it's unclear how a cut in support would affect the CIA's ongoing, global operations.

The transition away from the department's CIA partnership is rooted in the [2018 national defense strategy](#) (NDS) announced by former US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis that stated the US' primary concern in regards to its national security would be its competition with growing powers - not so much counterterrorism.

At the time, Elbridge Colby, the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, [explained to Defense News](#) that the NDS would essentially work in a way



that allows for more “cost-effective” and “tailored” methods to carry out counterterrorism missions.

The Pentagon presently provides the CIA with support in a multitude of ways that often includes logistics, air transportation and medical evacuation and ultimately serves as a backbone for intelligence operations.

Additionally, although the spy agency does have its own independent Special Activities Center (SAC) that taps service members for covert and paramilitary missions, the center still relies on the Pentagon to provide more support. One unidentified former administration official remarked to Defense One that military detailees moved under the CIA often become “a permanent houseguest” under the division.

Mick Mulroy, an ABC contributor who previously also served as assistant deputy secretary to Mattis, told the outlet that if reports of the Pentagon’s split from the CIA are true, “they mark a serious setback to a very strong and effective relationship” between the two organizations.

“This could increase the risk to CIA officers until it can be readdressed by the incoming administration,” he added. “If it is not reversed, the CIA needs to be increased in personnel and funding to make up for the difference to continue their critical missions.”

Mulroy echoed concerns that were previously raised by a former military official who told Defense One that the potential shift would “pull the rug from under” the CIA. The individual added, “If they start dying in Afghanistan, this is going to be a big deal.”

The development comes after reports emerged late last month, detailing that a [veteran CIA paramilitary officer had been killed](#) in combat in Somalia. The unidentified service member was formerly part of the US Navy’s SEAL Team 6 before transitioning to the SAC. Incidentally, days later, US President Donald Trump ordered the Pentagon and US Africa Command to [withdraw nearly all American troops from Somalia](#).

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Hillary Clinton Says Republican Lawmakers Who ‘Humor’ Trump’s Election Claims ‘Have No Spines’

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since Election Day and the subsequent call by US media that Democratic candidate Joe Biden won the 2020 election, US President Donald Trump has adamantly refused to concede, instead deciding to fight the results in the legal system while alleging widespread voter fraud sunk his bid for a second term.

Hillary Clinton, who previously made two failed bids for the White House in 2008 and 2016, remarked on Thursday that any Republican lawmakers who entertain Trump’s voter fraud claims have no valid standing.

The former secretary of state expressed her distaste for elected members of the GOP on Twitter, noting that “the election was not close. There was no evidence of fraud.”

"The states have certified the results. Yet Trump continues to try to overturn the election at the expense of our democracy," [she continued](#). "The emperor has no clothes. Republican electeds who continue to humor him have no spines."

Despite Trump giving the go-ahead for the General Services Administration to [begin the transition process](#) toward a Biden administration, the commander-in-chief has maintained that he was robbed of a second presidential term by election malfeasance.

Several lawsuits have been filed, albeit many of which have been rejected and dismissed due to a lack of evidence or merit. And yet, there is still a [strong movement within the Republican Party](#) to back Trump's unsubstantiated claims, with Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton [most recently filing a lawsuit](#) that calls for the US Supreme Court to challenge the election results.

Paxton's lawsuit, which has been dismissed by many as a publicity stunt, alleges that Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin altered their election laws ahead of the 2020 contest to allow for massive voter fraud to take place in the highly contested election.

As part of the US' Electoral College system, governors are required to have their states' votes certified, and electors - delegates to the Electoral College - are required to meet separately and cast their ballots for US president, which will occur this year on December 14.

However, a winner isn't formally certified until Congress counts the electoral votes on January 6, 2021, and in the event that a candidate doesn't secure the backing of a majority of the electors, the US House of Representatives determines the winner, a procedure laid out in the 12th Amendment to the US Constitution.

Recently, at least one Republican lawmaker in the US House has vowed to challenge the Electoral College vote. US Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) [confirmed to The Hill](#) that he would dispute the vote "because in my judgment this is the worst election theft in the history of the United States."

To date, both the [Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency](#) and [US Attorney General William Barr](#) have declared that there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could have changed the outcome of the election.

A [recent survey by the Washington Post](#) determined that 220 Republicans from both the US House and Senate will not say who won the election, with just two GOP members saying that Trump did in fact win despite it not being projected by any tally.

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COVID-19 Identified in Italy Three Months Before First Case Was Confirmed, Report Reveals by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy became the first European country hit devastatingly hard by the deadly respiratory disease, which ravaged much of the country's Lombardy region. To date, the country holds the second-highest COVID-19 death toll in Europe behind the UK, according to the Worldometer database.



A [new report](#) recently published by the US' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has indicated that the very first cases of [COVID-19](#) emerged in Italy at the end of November 2019, some three months before a case was officially confirmed by officials.

Analyzing oral swab specimens collected from 39 consenting patients between September 2019 and February 2020, researchers discovered that all but one sample came back positive for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Upon further investigation, officials determined that the first COVID-19 case within Italy was documented in a 4-year-old boy who lived outside of Milan, the tourist hotspot that quickly became a hotbed for the respiratory disease at the onset of the pandemic.

Officials noted in the report that the child was first taken to health experts for a cough and rhinitis - two symptoms associated with COVID-19 - on November 21 before being taken to the emergency room a week later after suffering from respiratory complications and vomiting. The next day, the child exhibited a rash, which doctors believed to be measles-like; however, a test came back negative for the infectious disease.

The report also details that the unidentified child had no reported travel history, which suggests that the virus was already present and spreading within the Lombardy region at the time. It's unclear how the child's treatment progressed and if he exhibited any other severe symptoms, since the sample was not tested for COVID-19 until some time later.

"These findings, in agreement with other evidence of early COVID-19 spread in Europe, advance the beginning of the outbreak to late autumn 2019," reads the report. "However, earlier strains also might have been occasionally imported to Italy and other countries in Europe during this period, manifesting with sporadic cases or small self-limiting clusters. These importations could have been different from the strain that became widespread in Italy during the first months of 2020."

"This finding is of epidemiologic importance because it expands our knowledge on timing and mapping of the SARS-CoV-2 transmission pathways," the report adds.

Prior to the latest development, researchers indicated that the first case in Italy was detected in a man from the Italian town of Codogno, about an hour's drive from Milan, on February 21, 2020.

Earlier this year, two studies were released that contradicted Italy's February timeline, with one body of work from June noting that scientists had found traces of SARS-CoV-2 in the [country's sewage system in mid-December 2019](#). The [second study](#) released in November, however, suggested that COVID-19 was thriving in Italy as early as September 2019.

The latest revelation comes as the [CDC recently forecast](#) that the number of COVID-19 deaths in the US, which has the highest case tally in the world, may total between 332,000 and 362,000 by the week ending January 2, 2021.

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Google to Review Controversial Dismissal of Top AI Researcher - CEO  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Over 1,500 Google employees and more than 2,000 academic, industry and civil society supporters have signed an online petition to stand by the Black scientist and artificial intelligence (AI) ethicist following her alleged wrongful termination.

Google CEO Sundar Pichai apologized to staffers on Wednesday for the company's handling of AI ethics researcher Dr. Timnit Gebru's departure.

"I've heard the reaction to Dr. Gebru's departure loud and clear: it seeded doubts and led some in our community to question their place at Google," Pichai said in a memo [obtained by Axios](#). "I want to say how sorry I am for that, and I accept the responsibility of working to restore your trust."

The Google CEO also pledged to launch a "review" of Gebru's departure in an attempt to "identify all the points where we can learn."

Days prior to Pichai's apology, Gebru - [who had been one of the 1.6% of Google's employees who are Black women](#) - claimed she was terminated from the company shortly after sending an email regarding her disappointment in Google's approach to diversity, equity and inclusion. Gebru's email came about after the company refused to attach her and her colleagues' names to an AI ethics paper on language models.

Google AI researcher Nicholas Le Roux, a white man, [defended his ex-colleague](#) on Twitter, arguing that the "easiest way to discriminate is to make stringent rules, then to decide when and for whom to enforce them."

"My submissions were always checked for disclosure of sensitive material, never for the quality of the literature review," he added.

Other individuals, like former Google public relations manager William Fitzgerald, expressed their disagreement with the company's handling of the situation.

A petition pledging to "Stand With Timnit" was also launched.

"Instead of being embraced by Google as an exceptionally talented and prolific contributor, Dr. Gebru has faced defensiveness, racism, gaslighting, research censorship, and now a retaliatory firing," the [online petition read](#).

"In an email to Dr. Gebru's team on the evening of December 2, 2020, Google executives claimed that she had chosen to resign. This is false. In their direct correspondence with Dr. Gebru, these executives informed her that her termination was immediate, and pointed to an email she sent to a Google Brain diversity and inclusion mailing list as pretext."

"Don't paint me as an 'angry Black woman' for whom you need 'de-escalation strategies' for," Gebru [said in a Twitter response](#) to the email.

Pichai argued in his Wednesday memo that the company should "accept responsibility for the fact that a prominent Black, female leader with immense talent left Google unhappily."

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Sen. Cotton Urges For Hunter Biden to Be Investigated  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)



The investigation into the projected US president-elect's son focuses on a wide range of issues, including his taxes and dealings in China and Ukraine. He is also reportedly suspected of money laundering by the Southern District of New York.

During a Thursday interview, US Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AK) told Fox News' Sandra Smith that a special counsel should be appointed to head an investigation into [the accusations of financial crimes made against Hunter Biden](#), the son of presumed US President-elect Joe Biden.

"These investigations span multiple jurisdictions and if Joe Biden becomes president then all of those prosecutors are in line to be fired next month," Cotton said, noting that Biden was [not yet officially destined to succeed US President Donald Trump](#) next month.

"If there were ever circumstances that created a conflict of interest and called for a special counsel, I think those circumstances are present here," Cotton added. "The Biden family has been trading on Joe Biden's public office for 50 years. Do we really think that that will change if Joe Biden becomes president, the highest office in the land?"

His calls echo [those made earlier this week by Rep. Ken Buck \(R-CO\)](#), who urged the attorney general to appoint a special counsel in order to ensure the probe is "free from political interference."

On Wednesday, the younger Biden [disclosed that his tax affairs are under investigation](#) by the US Attorney's Office in his home state of Delaware. However, [later that day, Politico revealed an additional investigation](#) against Hunter Biden by the securities fraud unit in the Southern District of New York and a federal probe by the Western District of Pennsylvania involving a hospital business in which James Biden, Hunter's uncle and Joe's brother, was involved.

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Far From a New Concoction, Morocco's Secret Ties With Israel Go Back Decades  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Even though it was preceded by several other Arab nations, Morocco's Thursday diplomatic recognition of Israel has been decades in the making and is just the latest of several attempts to normalize relations amid secret underground connections.

On Thursday, US President [Donald Trump revealed that Morocco would become the sixth](#) Arab nation to recognize Israel diplomatically, ending the de facto state of war that had existed since 1948. In exchange, the US has agreed to recognize Morocco's claims to annexing [Western Sahara, a nation Morocco has occupied since 1979](#).

However, the news is anything but surprising: in fact, Morocco and Israel have secret underground connections going back decades, and there have been numerous attempts at normalizing relations over the years.

#### Decades of Underground Connections

When Israel declared its nationhood in 1948, the Arab world united against the new state, with some sending armies to contest its territorial claims and others extending support for those engaged in combat. A contingent of 800 Moroccan soldiers buttressed the tiny Lebanese army,



itself just 2,000 strong, although in the end Lebanon was almost totally uninvolved in the war, occupying just two villages for a brief period.

However, after the end of the fighting, none of the Arab states signed a peace agreement with Israel, which would have given it diplomatic legitimacy by accepting it as a state. In turn, the Jewish communities of many Arab nations soon emigrated, with as many as 250,000 leaving Morocco by 1967, not all of whom moved to Israel.

In 2016, Maj. Gen. Shlomo Gazit, who headed Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate from 1974 to 1978, [revealed that in 1965, Moroccan King Hassan II had secretly passed](#) to Israel recordings of meetings between Arab leaders that revealed preparations for a major war against Israel. [According to the Times of Israel, the Israelis used](#) the Moroccan intelligence to help plan the sneak attack they launched on June 5, 1967, that annihilated the militaries of Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

According to Gazit, Hassan's duplicity came from his distrust of the other Arab League members, including Egyptian President Gamel Abd al-Nasser, and involved inviting senior leaders of the Israeli Shin Bet and Mossad to a hotel in Casablanca - something Meir Amit, Mossad's then-chief, described as "one of the crowning glories of Israeli intelligence."

Despite this, Morocco once again dispatched troops to fight Israel in 1973, when they participated in Syria's defense of the Golan Heights, which Israel subsequently seized and annexed.

Another major connection came in 1975, after Morocco first claimed sovereignty over the newborn Western Sahara, which Spain had only recently relinquished as a colony. The Moroccans soon faced a powerful insurgency by the native Saharawi people, who declared a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic the same year.

[According to the US Army War College, Israeli advisors helped Rabat](#) to reorganize the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces, [and is also believed to have helped Morocco](#) to construct the 2,700-kilometer-long sand berm that divides Western Sahara in two, although neither party has admitted to either claim.

"Nobody knows about this wall, and it was built with the help of the United States and Israel, who are key players in this region, so we want people to know about it," Maria Carrion, who directs the FiSahara human rights film festival at the Sahrawis' Dakhla [refugee camp in Algeria](#), [told Al Jazeera](#).

In 1976, [Hassan II secretly hosted Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin](#), who hoped to reset Israeli-Egyptian relations, and a year later they hosted secret talks between Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Egyptian national security advisor Hassan Tohamy that laid the groundwork for Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel. In 1978, Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin signed peace accords in Camp David, Maryland, and Egypt became the first Arab nation to recognize Israel.

In 1986 came the first attempt at normalizing relations between Rabat and Tel Aviv, when Hassan II had hosted Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres at his palace in Ifrane. While neither side has acknowledged the meetup, [the New York Times characterized it at the time](#) as an open secret. Once news became public, however, protests from other Arab states forced Hassan to back down.

Low-level talks resumed in 1994 amid the Oslo peace negotiations that established the Palestinian Authority and the principle of a two-state solution. Hassan again hosted Israeli and



Arab leaders in Casablanca, [after which they issued a "Casablanca declaration"](#) that purported to have ended the Arab boycott of Israel. The meeting's success then led to the establishment of liaison offices by both nations. However, the rapprochement fell apart in 2000, with the onset of the Second Intifada.

Support for Western Sahara Annexation Key to Deal

Talks leading to Thursday's announcement began in 2018, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita [on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, according to Axios](#).

Jewish-Moroccan businessman Yariv Elbaz, a close confidant of Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, served as a key figure in the backchannel along with Israeli national security adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat. Kushner is also responsible for helping push Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar to sign their own peace declarations with Israel earlier this year. Mossad chief Yossi Cohen was reportedly furious at the news.

According to Axios, the basis of the deal was to include a US recognition of Morocco's rule over Western Sahara - a key part of the present deal.

Recognition of Western Sahara seems to have been key to turning Rabat's opinion about normalization. As recently as September, when the UAE and Qatar penned their deals with Israel, an [adviser to the Moroccan prime minister told Israel Hayom](#) a potential peace deal would be impossible otherwise.

Convincing the Trump administration to support their claims over Western Sahara was likely not very difficult. [Morocco has long been a key ally of the US](#), receiving extensive foreign aid as well as support from the CIA for King Hassan II. In turn, the US Air Force was allowed to operate the huge Nouasseur Air Base outside Casablanca, a major stop-off point for US nuclear bombers during their patrols in the 1950s and early 1960s.

By the 1970s, [CIA conviction that the Soviet Union and East Germany](#) were training Saharawi forces and other Imazighen tribesmen as communist guerrillas called the "Revolutionary Movement of Blue Men" led to even greater support for Rabat.

By 2019, [Morocco had become Washington's largest overseas arms buyer](#), requesting some \$10 billion in weapons that year, much of it funded by the foreign aid and Foreign Military Financing provided by Washington.

In 2015, Rabat joined Riyadh's coalition against the Yemeni Houthi movement, sending a squadron of F-16 Falcons brought from Washington to bomb Yemeni cities. [However, by 2019 as the war stagnated and Yemeni losses mounted](#), King Mohammed VI pulled the squadron out of the war. Despite this, Saudi and Emirati support for Morocco's claims over Western Sahara has remained strong.

In 2018, a new rift opened between Morocco and Iran when the Moroccan foreign minister [claimed that Iran and Hezbollah were funding and training Saharawi](#) rebels in Western Sahara via the Iranian embassy in Algiers. Iran, Hezbollah and the Polisario Front have all denied the accusations, but Rabat cut ties anyway.

This new rift is only likely to widen now that Morocco and Israel have made nice.

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## US Africa Command to Get Budget Boost Amid Somalia Withdrawal by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Pentagon and Congress have been debating for more than a year about what to do with the nearly 6,000 US military and civilian personnel in Africa. While US President Donald Trump recently ordered the withdrawal of US troops from Somalia, a leading Pentagon figure clarified they weren't leaving the continent.

Despite a number of recent policy shifts and amid an ongoing debate about the US' military presence in Africa, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) will be getting a funding boost in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), [the Pentagon funding bill already passed by the House](#) and on which the Senate is due to vote.

[US military publication Stars and Stripes reported](#) earlier this week that the new Pentagon budget adds \$38.5 million to AFRICOM's funding next year, giving it a total of \$277.5 million; the Germany-based command only requested \$239 million.

By mid-January, most of the roughly 700 US troops deployed to Somalia to fight al-Qaeda-aligned al-Shabaab will be withdrawn from the country, according to orders given by Trump last month. Trump has pledged to end longstanding US overseas conflicts, including the undeclared war in Somalia the US has been fighting since 2007.

However, the US military is not withdrawing from East Africa, [AFRICOM commander Gen. Stephen Townsend told the Military Times](#). "Our presence in Somalia will decrease significantly but US forces will remain in the region and our tasks and commitment to partners remain unchanged ... This action is not a withdrawal and an end to our efforts but a reposition to continue our efforts in East Africa."

The US also has forces stationed across the border in Kenya at bases such as Camp Simba, which came under attack in January by al-Shabaab forces that crossed the border. The raid destroyed several aircraft used to wage the US' war in Somalia and killed one US soldier and two American contractors.

Using the justification of al-Shabaab expanding the war, AFRICOM commanders reportedly have pushed to expand their operations into Kenya as well, the New York Times reported in September, citing unnamed American officials.

[Other AFRICOM bases in East Africa include](#) Chembelly and Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti; Mombasa, Kenya; and Entebbe, Uganda.

The decision also comes as [US Army Europe and US Army Africa are merged](#) into a single command - US Army Europe and Africa - and [AFRICOM looks for a new headquarters amid](#) the shifting of several thousand US troops out of Germany. AFRICOM is presently based in Stuttgart after no African country would accept the headquarters on its soil.

In the longer term, some Pentagon officials want to see almost all US troops removed from Africa. In January 2020, [then-US Defense Secretary Mark Esper revealed](#) he wanted to move as many US troops as possible from peacekeeping duties and patrols to confronting Russia and China, which he called "mission number one."

US lawmakers have pushed back, saying the troops cannot be spared, since Daesh could become stronger in their absence, or even that Russia or China could establish footholds. However, [the Pentagon is also attempting to train local surrogate forces](#) to take over many of the duties of active duty US troops under its 127 Echo program.



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White House to Propose Massive Shipbuilding Plan That Trades Carriers for Smaller Warships - Report  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A proposed five-year shipbuilding plan the White House plans to soon unveil would give the US Navy a much bigger budget, but slash plans for several of its future aircraft carriers, riling Pentagon planners who have debated for years how to balance naval needs with those of the other service branches.

[Defense One reports that a White House Office](#) of Management and Budget (OMB) document that will soon be released proposes an extensive new shipbuilding plan at the expense of some of the Navy's future aircraft carriers.

A spokesperson for Russ Vought, director of the OMB, told Defense One, "Our updated 30-year shipbuilding plan is a credible, affordable roadmap for achieving maritime supremacy and sending a strong message to our adversaries like China."

One official familiar with the plan told Defense One the necessary cuts to the Army and Air Force to make the proposed Navy budget work "are completely unsustainable for any service, and will result in a hollow force if they remain."

[In a Wednesday op-ed in the Wall Street Journal](#), Vought and White House national security adviser Robert O'Brien defended the Pentagon's ability to meet the steep demands.

"Assuming a Defense Department budget top line that is effectively frozen at \$722 billion in fiscal 2022, adjusted only for inflation, the plan would increase shipbuilding construction by only \$6.7 billion, or 33%, to \$27 billion in the first year. The Navy buildup would add an additional \$39 billion by 2026. Other national-security priorities would not need to be sacrificed. The increased costs would be fully paid for by reinvesting savings accrued from drawdowns in the Middle East, managing the size of military personnel, and cutting Pentagon overhead," they wrote.

The OMB proposal would reportedly cut the fifth as-yet unnamed Ford-class, which is expected to enter service in 2036, meaning [the Navy would build just four of the new warships](#): the Ford, already finished but yet to enter service; the USS John F. Kennedy, presently fitting out; the USS Enterprise, scheduled for its keel to be laid in 2022; and the USS Doris Miller, scheduled to begin in 2026. [Congress has appropriated funding for all four warships](#).

According to present service life estimates, if the fifth planned Ford-class carrier were canceled, then in 2040, the Navy would have nine carriers, in 2046 just seven, and even less by the 2050s. Earlier this year, [an internal Future Naval Force Study recommended](#) the Navy maintain between eight and 11 carriers.

That study, the results of which former Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced in October, recommended as many as 500 ships by 2045, including at least 140 unmanned warships. The Navy's present strength is 296 warships, and it has been operating since 2016 based on the goals of a 355-ship Navy by 2030.

[As Sputnik has reported, the Navy's present shipbuilding schedule](#) wouldn't reach that goal. However, the proposed plan's \$170 billion investment between 2022 and 2026, which would buy 82 manned and 21 unmanned warships, would.

Some of those ships would be from [the forthcoming Constellation-class of frigates](#), the Virginia-class attack submarines and a new nuclear-powered attack submarine class, as well as a new model of aircraft carrier to follow the fourth Ford-class supercarrier.

"The question of whether the Navy should shift at some point from procuring CVNs [nuclear-powered aircraft carriers] like the [Ford] class to procuring smaller and perhaps nonnuclear-powered aircraft carriers has been a recurrent matter of discussion and Navy study over the years, and is currently an active discussion in the Navy," [a Congressional Research Service report](#) published on Wednesday noted.

The Navy has already experimented with the idea somewhat, [converting some of its landing helicopter docks into "lightning carriers"](#) loaded down with F-35B Lightning II stealth aircraft instead of their normal allotment of helicopters.

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger described the "lightning carrier" concept as "the birth of the most lethal, aviation-capable amphibious assault ship to date," noting the configuration makes the Navy all the more "unpredictable" to its foes.

"You would like to see one of those big decks one time go out with two squadrons of F-35s and next time fully loaded with MV-22s [VTOL helicopters] and another [Marine expeditionary unit] with a 50-50 combo," [Berger said at a February event](#). ["Now that's how you become unpredictable"](#). How do you defend against that?"

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New US Sanctions to Deepen Crisis in Relations With Russia - Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States' new sanctions against two Russians and six Russian entities will further damage the bilateral relationship, Ambassador Anatoly Antonov told reporters.

"The actions of the US administration are just another unfriendly and detrimental move against Russia which will deepen the crisis in bilateral relations," the Russian ambassador to Washington said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the US Treasury Department announced it has designated the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation and four Chechen officials, including Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, along with other persons and entities in Chechnya in a new round of Global Magnitsky Act sanctions.

Other sanctioned Chechen entities include Megastroyinvest and Chechen Mineral Waters Ltd. Antonov said these allegations of human rights violations are groundless and accused the Trump administration of taking this action to distract from issues, including on human rights, in the United States.



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**US Adds \$488Mln to Refunds for Madoff Ponzi Victims, Total Now Tops \$3Bln - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Victims of a Ponzi scheme run by con artist Bernard Madoff will receive \$488 million in the sixth distribution of funds seized by the US government, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"In this distribution, payments will be sent to over 30,000 victims across the globe, bringing their total recovery to 80.05 percent. This distribution represents the sixth in a series of payments that will eventually return over \$4 billion to victims as compensation for losses they suffered from the collapse of the BLMIS [Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities]," the release said on Thursday.

The latest payout brings distributions from the Madoff Victim Fund to 3.2 billion, the release said.

The money was collected in a series of civil forfeiture recoveries from the estates of several Madoff co-conspirators and a deferred prosecution agreement with JP Morgan Chase Bank, the release added.

Madoff pleaded guilty to 11 federal felonies in 2009, admitting that he had turned his wealth management business into the world's largest Ponzi scheme, benefitting himself, his family and select members of his inner circle. He received a 150-year prison sentence, according to the release.

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## US FDA Advisory Panel Approves Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine for Americans

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A US Food and Drug Administration advisory panel approved Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine for use on Americans to try and curb the spread of a pandemic that had infected more than 15 million people in the country and killed almost 300,000 of them.

"We do have a favorable vote," Kathleen Hayes, the official who tallied the votes cast at the meeting, said in a live-stream of Thursday's event held to determine if the vaccine jointly developed by Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech was safe for use.

The advisory panel members were asked to consider the question: "Based on the totality of the scientific evidence available, do the benefits of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine outweigh its risks for use in individuals 16 years of age or older?"

They overwhelmingly voted 17-4 in favor of the vaccine.

Earlier, during the meeting, the advisory panel requested data on severe allergic reactions to the vaccine.

The request came after two allergic reactions reported by UK health-care workers given the shots developed by Pfizer and BioNTech.

The United Kingdom's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency had also updated its guidance on Wednesday to advise people who have a history of "significant" allergic reactions to forgo the vaccine.

"I believe most of us are going to be revisiting some of these issues in about a week," Arnold Monto, the epidemiologist who chaired Thursday's panel meeting, said before concluding.

Pfizer did not immediately react to the FDA's approval of its vaccine and bid to gather more data on the allergic reactions reported in Britain.

The Pfizer vaccine is the first immunization against the coronavirus greenlighted by the FDA, which is also considering for approval a similar shot developed by Moderna Inc.

The Pfizer vaccine is expected to be rolled out as soon as Friday to healthcare workers and long-term nursing home residents under a massive mobilization effort carried out by the US Army under the Trump administration "Operation Warp Speed" project.

People who get one of the two COVID-19 vaccines should get their second shot 21 or 28 days after the first one, according to the manufacturers.

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## US Indicts 40 Prison Inmates For Running Murder, Kidnapping Ring From Jail - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Forty prison inmates in the US state of South Carolina face charges of running a violent gun- and drug-trafficking network from jail, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"The indictment alleges a sprawling criminal enterprise whereby inmates with the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC), often through the use of contraband cell phones,



orchestrated murder, kidnapping, firearms distribution, and an international drug operation," the release said on Thursday.

The grand jury indictment charged the defendants with conspiracy under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, and several charges under the Violent Crimes in Aid of Racketeering (VICAR) statute, the release said.

The 101-page indictment further alleges that several inmates ordered violent retaliatory measures - including kidnapping and murder - against those they believed were providing information to law enforcement and against individuals they believed had stolen drug proceeds or owed money to the gang, the release added.

In connection with the investigation, agents seized more than 40 kilograms of methamphetamine, more than 130 firearms, and various quantities of heroin and fentanyl, according to the release.

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**US Jury Convicts Illinois Man For 2017 Minnesota Mosque Bombing - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A federal jury has convicted a resident of the US state of Illinois for the bombing of a mosque in Bloomington, Minnesota more than three years ago, the Department of Justice announced in a press release.

"[On Wednesday], a federal jury returned a guilty verdict against Micheal Hari, 49, for his role in the bombing of the Dar al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, Minnesota, on August 5, 2017," the release said on Thursday.

After a three week trial, the jury convicted Hari on all five counts of the indictment, including intentionally defacing and destroying religious property, deliberately trying to obstruct by force the free exercise of religious beliefs, conspiracy to commit federal felonies by fire and explosives and using a destructive device, the release said.

"Hari faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 30 years in prison," the release added.

Hari established in Clarence, Illinois, a terrorist militia group called "The White Rabbits." which he outfitted with tactical vests and assault rifles. They targeted the Dar al-Farooq Islamic Center in an attempt to scare Muslims into believing they were not welcome in the United States and should leave the country, according to the release.

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**US FDA Advisory Panel Approves Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine for Americans**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A US Food and Drug Administration advisory panel approved Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine for use on Americans.

The panel of outside advisers to the FDA voted 17-4 to approve emergency use for the vaccine jointly developed by Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech, a panel member said after Thursday's meeting.

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#### **US Senator Says Trump's Turnaround on West Sahara Shocking, Ill-Advised**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Senator Jim Inhofe said in a statement that he is shocked by President Donald Trump's decision "to trade away" the rights of the West Saharan people and recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed region.

"Today's White House announcement alleging Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara is shocking and deeply disappointing. I am saddened that the rights of the Western Saharan people have been traded away," Inhofe said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the Trump administration brokered a peace agreement between Israel and Morocco with which the two countries established diplomatic relations and pledged to cooperate. The United States recognized Morocco's sovereignty of the disputed West Sahara region that has sought independence.

Inhofe said the recognition breaks away from the international consensus and the United States' long-standing approach to normalizing Israel-Morocco relations.

Morocco has long been involved in a conflict with the Polisario Front movement over control of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony that was transferred under control of Morocco and Mauritania in 1973.

In 1976, the Polisario Front declared it had established the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Morocco has since pushed a plan for the region to have an autonomous status, while the Polisario Front has insisted that the status of West Sahara should be determined by a referendum.

Inhofe said Western Sahara deserves a referendum of self-determination to determine its own future.

"Until today, this administration had continued our long history, one that has remained consistent across administrations," he said, adding that the change in approach was "poorly advised" because it trades the rights of a voiceless people."

Inhofe urged the United Nations, European Union, African Union and the International Court of Justice to continue pressing for a referendum and expressed confidence the US will be able to return to its original policy.

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## At Least 106 House Republicans Back US Supreme Court Bid to Overturn Election - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - At least 106 Republicans in the House of Representatives are urging the US Supreme Court to take up Texas' lawsuit to address unconstitutional actions regarding the 2020 election in four key battleground states that will enable state legislatures to choose a slate of electors, a court filing revealed.

"It is now the duty of this Honorable Court to objectively review the facts presented by the Plaintiff in this historic case, render judgment upon the unconstitutional actions in the Defendant states, and restore the confidence of all Americans that the rule of law will be upheld today and our elections in the future will be secured," the court filing said on Thursday.

Some of the lawmakers that signed the brief won their elections in the sued states, including Congressmen Rick Allen, Buddy Carter, Drew Ferguson, Austin Scott, Bill Huizenga, John Moolenaar, Tim Walberg, John Joyce, Glenn Thompson, Guy Reschenthaler, Scott Perry, Dan Meuser, Mike Kelly, Fred Keller and Tom Tiffany.

Idaho Lt. Governor Janice McGeachin and a few other elected state officials in Alaska, Arizona and Idaho also filed a joint brief in support of the Texas lawsuit.

In addition, several members of the Pennsylvania legislature filed a brief to the US Supreme Court asking it to take up the case in order to resolve concerns regarding the results of the November 3 election and avoid future claims that could impact elections in the state.

In a separate brief, several Pennsylvania State Senators asked the US Supreme Court to affirm the authority to state legislatures and not courts in accordance with the US Constitution's Electors Clause.

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## US May Face Most Difficult Time Amid COVID-19 in Next 3 Months – CDC Director

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The spike of COVID-19 in the next three months may push the United States to the most difficult public health situation in its history, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Robert Redfield told reporters.

"Next three months in the US is going to be really rough. In my personal belief, it is going to be the most difficult time in the public health history of this nation," Redfield said during a virtual conversation on Thursday.

The US is currently facing widespread transmission of the disease throughout the country, while November added over 4 million of new COVID-19 cases, he noted.

Novel coronavirus became a leading cause of death, surpassing heart and other diseases, Redfield said.

US authorities have reported that more than 15.4 million people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since the beginning of pandemic, and the death toll now stands at 290, 219, John Hopkins University data revealed on Thursday afternoon.

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**US Extradites Chinese National From Malaysia on Turtle-Trafficking Charges - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A Chinese smuggler who purchased 1,500 American turtles and shipped them to Hong Kong for resale in black markets throughout Asia faces money laundering and wildlife trafficking charges, the US Justice Department said in a press release. "Kang Juntao, 24, of Hangzhou City, China, was charged in February 2019 with financing a nationwide ring of individuals who smuggled at least 1,500 protected turtles out of the United States valued at \$2,250,000," the release said on Thursday.

The indictment said that from June 2017 to December 2018, Kang purchased turtles, including common subspecies of the eastern US box turtle, and arranged for them to be smuggled to associates in Hong Kong. He sent money through US banks, to pay for the turtles and their illegal shipments, the release said.

The turtles would then be sold on the Asian pet trade black market for thousands of dollars each, depending on their sex, coloring, and age, the release said.

Turtles are considered a culinary delicacy for special occasions in China, with added medicinal properties believed to promote longevity.

The United States, Malaysia, China, and approximately 181 other countries are signatories to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international treaty that restricts trade in species that may be threatened with extinction, the release said.

Kang, who was arrested by Malaysian police in 2019, allegedly trafficked five turtle species protected by the treaty including the eastern box turtle, the Florida box turtle, and the Gulf Coast box turtle, as well as the semi-aquatic spotted turtle and the wood turtle, the release added.

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**US State of Georgia Investigates 132 Allegations of Election Law Violations - Official**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Allegations from President Donald Trump and his supporters of massive voter fraud continued to fizzle on Thursday with an announcement that the state of Georgia has just 132 open investigations of election law violations from the 2020 presidential contest, Georgia Voting Manager Gabriel Sterling told reporters.

The announcement reflected a clarification of an earlier figure cited by Sterling of 250 violations.

"What it really comes down to is about 101 cases from pre-general-election time and right now, 132 cases that are involving the general election, Sterling said on Thursday.

Either way, the size and scope of Georgia's post-election probe pales when compared to the state's nearly 12,000-vote margin for Trump's rival Joe Biden.



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**Swalwell Must Resign From Congress After China Spy Revelations - US House Minority Leader**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Democratic Congressman Eric Swalwell should resign from Congress after the revelations that he ignored FBI warnings about consorting with Christina Fang, a woman later accused of being a Chinese spy, US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy told a press conference.

"Why did Eric Swalwell after he was warned by the FBI, why did he challenge the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Ratcliffe on the rise of China spying [in the United States]," McCarthy said on Thursday. "That begins to raise a question that he is a national risk and should not serve on the [US House] Intelligence Committee."

McCarthy also called for an investigation as to why House Speaker Nancy Pelosi put Swalwell on the Intelligence Committee in only his second two-year term in Congress. Swalwell was a leading figure in repeating false accusations that President Donald Trump had secret and improper ties with Moscow in the Russiagate controversy.

The Russian government has always rejected all allegations for which no evidence has ever been found.

"Did anyone approach Pelosi to put someone in his second term on the Intelligence Committee? Why did the Democrats bail out of a bipartisan commission [on improper Chinese influence in the United States]? Why did she allow him to stay on that committee for years? They talked about foreign influence," McCarthy asked.

Pelosi publicly supported Swalwell on Thursday and told reporters at her own Capitol Hill press conference that she had no concerns about him.

Earlier in the week, the Axios website reported the results of its 12 month investigation into Chinese spy Christine Fang, who targeted emerging local politicians in the Bay Area in northern California, close to San Francisco and Silicon Valley, as well as across the United States.

According to the report, one of her targets was Swalwell and she was involved in fundraising activities on his behalf and placed an intern in his office.

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**US Puts Troops in Mideast on Heightened Alert Over Pro-Iran Militia Activities - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has placed its troops in the Middle East on heightened alert due to potential indications of a potential attack by pro-Iran militias, Politico reported.

The report quoted on Thursday a military official as saying that the US Defense Department is seeing troubling indicators of "potential attack preparations" from pro-Iran militias in Iraq. The report said US authorities have expressed concern about potential attacks ahead of the first anniversary of the United States assassinating Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq. Soleimani was killed by a US drone strike outside Baghdad in January. Iran retaliated with a missile attack at two military bases in Iraq that housed US service members. The attack did not result in any fatalities, but many US troops have complained that they suffered concussion injuries.

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#### **At Least 106 House Republicans Back US Supreme Court Bid to Overturn Election - Filing**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - At least 106 Republicans in the US House of Representatives are urging the Supreme Court to take up Texas' lawsuit to invalidate election results in four key battleground states, a court filing revealed.

"It is now the duty of this Honorable Court to objectively review the facts presented by the Plaintiff in this historic case, render judgment upon the unconstitutional actions in the Defendant states, and restore the confidence of all Americans that the rule of law will be upheld today and our elections in the future will be secured," the court filing said on Thursday.

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#### **US Budget Deficit Up 25% in First 2 Months of Budget Year Amid COVID-19 - Treasury Data**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US government's budget deficit ran 25 percent higher in the first two months of the 2020 budget year versus the same period of last year amid the coronavirus pandemic, Treasury Department data showed.

The deficit - which accounts for the slack in tax receipts versus expenditure - showed there was a 2.9 percent decline in tax revenues, to \$457.3 billion, against a 8.9% rise in outlays, to \$886.6 billion, according to the data released Thursday.

The federal government ran deficits of near \$1 trillion per year even in times of growth, according to the Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Center. Yet, now, because policymakers are enacting emergency measures to combat the COVID-19 crisis, deficits are escalating to levels not seen since World War II.

The center noted that the federal government has so far run a record deficit of \$3.1 trillion in fiscal year 2020, more than triple the deficit for fiscal year 2019.

Before 2010, the largest such deficit was in 2009, when the government faced a \$1.4 trillion shortfall while fighting to lift the country out of the 2008/2009 financial crisis.



This year's deficit could get larger if Congress manages to pass another fiscal relief for the Covid-19.

Congress originally passed a Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

Since then, Democrats in the House of Representatives have been locked in a bitter debate with Republicans in the Senate on a successive relief plan to the CARES Act. The dispute has basically been over the size of the next stimulus, and who and what gets help. Meanwhile, thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risk losing their jobs without further aid.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) -

#### ISRAEL, MOROCCO NORMALIZE RELATIONS

\* The newly brokered peace deal between Israel and Morocco entails the establishment of full diplomatic relations and air travel between the two nations, US President Donald Trump's senior advisor Jared Kushner said on Thursday.

\* Kushner told reporters that he sees the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as an inevitability.

#### NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The United States has designated the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation and four Chechen officials, including Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, along with other persons and entities in Chechnya in a new round of Global Magnitsky Act sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

\* Kadyrov said, commenting on fresh US sanctions against Akhmat football club and the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation, that these restrictions would not affect the republic in any way.

#### NEW EUROPEAN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The United Kingdom has imposed sanctions on 11 individuals and one entity from Russia, Venezuela, Gambia and Pakistan for alleged human rights violation, the UK government said Thursday in a statement.

\* The summit of the heads of state of the European Union decided to once again extend the economic sanctions against Russia, Barend Leyts, the spokesman for European Council President Charles Michel, said.

## EU-UK TRADE AGREEMENT

\* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday that there is a "strong possibility" that his country and the European Union will fail to conclude a free trade agreement before the end of the Brexit transition period on December 31.

## NETHERLANDS EXPELLS RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS

\* Russian diplomats, who were accused of espionage and declared personae non grata, must leave the Netherlands within two weeks, the Dutch Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

\* Moscow will retaliate against the declaration of two Russian diplomats personae non grata in the Netherlands, the Russian Embassy in The Hague said.

\* Moscow will respond in kind if media reports of Amsterdam expelling two Russians diplomats turn out to be true, chair of the upper chamber's committee on state sovereignty, Andrey Klimov, told Sputnik.

## CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

\* About 6.9 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus are expected to enter civilian use in Russia between December and late February, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova said.

\* Argentina has signed a contract with Russia for the supply of the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine and expects to vaccinate 10 million people in January-February, President Alberto Fernandez said.

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**US Battleground States Urge Supreme Court to Reject Bid by Trump, Allies to Undo Biden Win**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Wisconsin are asking the US Supreme Court to send a clear message that the judicial process should not be abused as the Trump campaign and its allies try to overturn the election results in the four battleground states, a court document revealed on Thursday.

On Tuesday, Texas filed a lawsuit seeking to block the states of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from participating in the electoral college.

"The Court should not abide this seditious abuse of the judicial process, and should send a clear and unmistakable signal that such abuse must never be replicated," the battleground states said in a brief in response to the Texas lawsuit.

The District of Columbia and 22 other Democratic states also filed a brief in support of the four battleground states, urging the Supreme Court to reject Texas' lawsuit.



On Wednesday, 17 Republican states submitted a brief to the US Supreme Court in support of Texas' lawsuit as "amici curiae" - without formally joining the bid.

Several of the states sued by Texas have said they did not find evidence of widespread fraud or substantial irregularities. The Trump campaign and the Republican party have lost more than 50 legal battles to try to invalidate President-elect Joe Biden's victory in key swing states.

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US Backed Troops in Syria With Armor to 'Show Teeth' to Russians - CENTCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US military augmented its contingent in Syria with a platoon of armored fighting vehicles to show strength and intimidate Russian troops, Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Frank McKenzie said on Thursday.

"We thought it is appropriate to show them a little more teeth up there. So we brought an M2 Bradley platoon, which is armored fighting vehicle," McKenzie said in an interview to the Defense One media outlet.

He explained that it happened a couple of months ago in response to a Russian patrol that was not coordinated with the Americans.

The general added that he decided to keep the armor in Syria to ensure that US servicemen on the ground have the protection they need to carry out tasks assigned to them.

McKenzie said that around 900 US troops are stationed in Syria in two clusters - near the country's southern border with Jordan and in the northeast area where they assist Kurdish militias from the Syrian Democratic Forces.

He denied rumors attributed to former envoy James Jeffrey that the military and diplomats played "shell games" to hide actual numbers from President Donald Trump to keep as many forces in the country as possible, contrary to the president's desire.

McKenzie also said that it is the SDF fighters who defend oil fields in Syria and US troops just enable them to do it. Control over reserves is necessary to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Islamic State terrorist group (outlawed in Russia), and allowing them to regenerate a nascent economy in eastern Syria.

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Trump Admin. Allegedly Destroyed Evidence of COVID-19 Guidance Meddling - House Panel

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Director Robert Redfield ordered the destruction of an email describing a Trump administration attempt to halt publication of an unspecified report on COVID-19, the chair of a House coronavirus panel said on Thursday.

The allegation surfaced during a transcribed interview with CDC Scientific Publications chief Charlotte Kent, who spoke with the House Coronavirus Subcommittee on December 7, panel Chairman James Clyburn said in a statement.

"During the interview, Dr. Kent stated that she was instructed to delete an August 8 email sent by HHS [Department of Health and Human Services] senior adviser Dr. Paul Alexander to her, Director Redfield, and HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Caputo. She also stated that she was informed that the direction to delete the email came from Director Redfield," Clyburn said.

Clyburn also warned that federal law requires the heads of federal agencies to preserve records, including emails, and that intentional destruction of records can be punished with a jail term of up to three years.

Following the Kent interview, the CDC canceled four interviews scheduled with the House panel and also refused to provide documents sought by the committee, the release said.

The committee set a December 15 deadline for the CDC to begin cooperating with the House investigation or lawmakers who would begin issuing subpoenas.

Clyburn's repeated the allegations in a letter to Health Secretary Alex Azar and Redfield, which included a request that Redfield meet with the committee on December 17 and that four canceled interviews with CDC staff be rescheduled.

The panel says it is investigating the scope of political interference by the Trump administration with scientific reports on COVID-19 and efforts to combat the disease.

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**US Recognition of Morocco's Sovereignty Over W.Sahara Violates Int'l Law - SADR Ambassador**

ALGIERS, December 10 (Sputnik) - The partially recognized Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which claims the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara, views US President Donald Trump's announcement of the recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory as contrary to international law, the SADR ambassador in Algeria told Sputnik on Thursday, adding that the sovereign state was waiting for the new US administration's position on the matter.

Earlier in the day, Trump announced that he had brokered a peace deal between Israel and Morocco and granted the latter the recognition of its sovereignty over the disputed region of Western Sahara, which is contested by the Polisario Front, the movement behind the SADR. Trump's senior adviser Jared Kushner explained that Morocco asserting control over the area was inevitable and an unnecessary roadblock for peace efforts in the region.

"Trump's statement is completely devoid of legitimacy. Trump does not have sovereignty over Western Sahara to hand it over to any country," Abd al-Qadir Talib Omar said, adding that the US president's decision violated international law, and that "it was not up to Washington to decide the fate of the whole world."



Omar noted that other powers, including the African Union and countries, which had recognized SADR, would contest the US' decision.

"Trump's unilateral and personal move will not change the determination of the people of Western Sahara," the ambassador said.

According to Omar, Morocco "stabbed" Palestine in the back, while Israel passed on to Rabat the experience of "creating settlements and building walls."

"We are waiting for the position of the newly elected US administration regarding Trump's statement, and we view it [statement] as a smoke, which will fade as soon as Trump leaves the White House," the diplomat said.

In mid-November, Morocco launched an operation against the Polisario Front in the buffer zone of Guerguerat in the Moroccan Sahara. Rabat said that it had no choice but to do it after the movement invaded the Morocco-controlled territories of Western Sahara in October, blocking passenger and cargo traffic across the border with Mauritania. The Polisario Front, in turn, accused Rabat of violating the 1991 ceasefire and initiating a war.

Morocco has long been involved in a conflict with the Polisario Front movement over control of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony that was transferred under control of Morocco and Mauritania in 1973. In 1976, Polisario Front declared that it had established the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The UN does not recognize SADR and demands that a referendum on self-determination be held. Morocco pushes a plan for the region's autonomy, while Polisario insists that the status of the territory should be determined by a referendum among the local population.

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#### **US General Confirms US Diplomatic Drawdown in Iraq Over Iran Scare**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Top US general in the Middle East, Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Frank McKenzie, confirmed on Thursday reports of a drawdown of American diplomatic personnel in Iraq to reduce exposure to possible Iranian attacks.

The move, described as small-scale and temporary, is timed to the upcoming first anniversary of the US airstrike that killed last January an Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani who was visiting Baghdad.

"That is a small drawdown... The Ambassador will remain, core embassy functions will remain," McKenzie said in an interview to the Defense One media outlet. "It was a smart thing to do to reduce our attack surface."

Earlier media reports suggested that the US is withdrawing as many as half of its diplomats from Iraq.

Fears also are that Iran, who has significant combat capabilities in Iraq through Shiite militias, may attempt to retaliate to last month's killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, its top nuclear scientist. Israel, America's major ally in the Middle East, is suspected to be behind his death.

McKenzie confirmed that his forces are on a path to reducing their presence in Iraq to 2,500 servicemen by January 15, 2021, as directed by US President Donald Trump. The general

assured that the remaining posture will still allow the US military to continue activities in Iraq at their current levels.

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**UPDATE - US on Path to Reducing Troop Levels to 2,500 in Afghanistan by January 15 - CENTCOM**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US military is on track to have forces drawn down to 2,500 in Afghanistan by the middle of January as planned, CENTCOM commander Gen. Frank McKenzie said on Thursday.

"We are on the path to be [at] 2,500 in January 15," McKenzie said in an interview with Defense One. "We'll have no trouble getting to that number."

McKenzie said the United States will also withdraw equipment so they don't have excess equipment there at that time.

Resolute Support Mission Commander Gen. Austin Miller and Central Command head Gen. Frank McKenzie have made recommendations to acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller regarding which US bases in Afghanistan should be closed.

Milley said the Acting Defense Secretary has approved the base closures but declined to reveal details about which ones will be closed.

In early November, Miller announced plans to reduce by January 15 the number of US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500 in each country.

As a result of the withdrawal agreement with the Taliban in February, the US reduced troop levels, in two phases, from 10,000 to 5,000 by the end of November.

President Donald Trump has faced resistance from both the Congress and Pentagon from critics who allege the drawdown is too swift and will reduce troop levels by too much.

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**UPDATE 2 - US Still Probing Alleged Russian Bounties in Afghanistan But Has Found No Proof - CENTCOM**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is still investigating reports of alleged Russian bounties on US and allied soldiers in Afghanistan, however, it has not found any proof, Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Frank McKenzie said on Thursday.

"It [investigation] is not closed, because we never close investigations that involve potential threats against US forces," McKenzie said in an interview with Defense One. "Nothing has changed since my position of last September. We just have not been able to prove it, we don't

see it. We look all the time at potential threats to our forces in Afghanistan... We just don't see it, but it's not because we are not looking at it, we are looking at it very hard."

In June, the New York Times reported that US intelligence had informed President Donald Trump in a February daily briefing about a suspected effort by Russia to place bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan.

Trump previously called the article a hoax, while White House officials and senior US military leaders publicly said that the intelligence was not convincing.

Russia denied the claim as another fake story that was part of the political infighting in the United States.

The Taliban movement also denied the allegations.

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**Trump Signs Executive Order for US Agencies to Use Logo on All Foreign Aid - White House**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump has signed an executive order administering federal agencies to utilize a single logo on all US foreign aid, the White House said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, President Donald J. Trump signed an Executive Order directing agencies of the United States Government to use a single logo on all United States foreign assistance," the statement said. "The Secretary of State, in coordination with the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, will be responsible for developing and coordinating this branding policy."

The United States is the world's single largest foreign aid donor with more than 20 federal agencies delivering foreign assistance under their individual brands and logos, the statement said.

Using a single logo will stress "the breadth and depth of the American taxpayers' generosity and support for the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities around the world," the statement added.

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#### **Uganda Attacks on Opposition Ahead of January Election Prompts Threat From US - Pompeo**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Uganda faces serious consequences from the United States if security forces continue attacking opposition candidates and their supporters ahead of upcoming elections, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned in a press release on Thursday.

"We are paying close attention to the actions of individuals who interfere in the democratic process and will not hesitate to consider serious consequences for those responsible for election-related violence and repression," Pompeo said.

Security forces have arrested candidates, blocked access to hotels, dispersed rallies and opened fire on opposition supporters, resulting in at least 50 deaths in the initial month of campaigning, according to local media reports.

Campaigns by most of the ten candidates seeking to oust President Yoweri Museveni in the January 14 election have been attacked by police, the news outlet AllAfrica reported.

Museveni is running for another term in office, which would extend his 35-year rule for an additional five years.

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#### **US To Sanction Turkey for Acquiring Russia's S-400 Air Defense System - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to sanction Turkey over the acquisition of Russian S-400 air defense system, Reuters reported on Thursday citing four unnamed sources.

The report said the sanctions would target Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries and its head Ismail Demir.

The long-anticipated move could be announced any day, the report added.

The Presidency of Defense Industries is a governmental body overseeing weaponry procurement and development.

Turkey opted to purchase the S-400 from Russia in 2017 after negotiations for the acquisition of its US counterpart, the Patriot system, broke down due to disagreements between the two countries over technology transfers.

The US responded to the delivery of the first batch of S-400 batteries by removing Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program on the grounds that Russia could use the air defense system to gather information on the advanced capabilities of the US aircraft.

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Congress Making Progress, Likely to Agree on Funding to Keep US Government Open - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Republicans and Democrats in the House of Representatives look likely to reach a bipartisan agreement to approve the funding to keep the US government running before the current lame duck session of Congress ends next week, Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters on Thursday.

"This is an emergency supplemental. I think they have made great progress. We cannot leave here without having a piece of legislation," Pelosi told a Capitol Hill press conference.

Pelosi said she remained optimistic the bill would be passed by the House of Representatives eight days from now. However, she stopped short of predicting or insisting upon any specific deadline for it.

"I would hope it would honor the December 18 deadline, but the votes have to be there. It is more important to get the job done for the American people. It has to be done before year's end to keep government open," Pelosi said.

On Wednesday, the House of Representatives approved in a bipartisan 343 to 67 vote to extend current government funding measures by an extra nine days to December 18 to give congressional negotiators time to reach agreement on the longer term appropriations bill. The Senate is expected to vote to pass it later on Thursday.

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#### Israel, Morocco Agree to Establish Full Diplomatic Relations - Trump

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump announced on Thursday that he brokered a peace deal between Israel and Morocco and granted the latter the recognition of its sovereignty over the disputed region of Western Sahara.

Morocco becomes the fourth Arab state this year and the sixth altogether to have fully normalized relations with Israel following the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan, who joined the Trump-sponsored Abraham Accords as well as Egypt and Jordan that made peace with Israel decades earlier.

"Another HISTORIC breakthrough today! Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations - a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!" Trump said via Twitter.

Trump noted that Morocco recognized the United States in 1777 and said it is fitting that Washington recognize their sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

Trump's adviser Jared Kushner told reporters that the deal involves establishing immediately liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv with the intention of opening embassies in the near future, launching flights between the two countries as well as promoting bilateral economic and cultural cooperation.

As part of the agreement, the United States sided with Morocco in its conflict with forces that seek independence for the Western Sahara and control parts of the region. Trump issued a proclamation the United States recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirms its support for "Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute."

The United States will also "encourage" Morocco's development and open a consulate in the Western Sahara "to promote economic and business opportunities for the region."

The White House said that Trump discussed the deal with Morocco's King Mohammed VI in a phone conversation on Thursday.

Kushner expressed hope additional peace agreements will materialize in the near future, including between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which he described as being inevitable.

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#### COVID-19-Related Death Toll in US Surpasses 290,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The death toll in the United States as a result of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has exceeded 290,000, John Hopkins University data revealed on Thursday.

US authorities have reported that more than 15.4 million people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since the beginning of pandemic, the data showed, and the death toll now stands at 290, 219.

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Israel-Morocco Deal Includes Establishing Diplomatic Missions, Launching Flights - Kushner

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The newly brokered peace deal between Israel and Morocco entails the establishment of full diplomatic relations and air travel between the two nations, US President Donald Trump's senior advisor Jared Kushner said on Thursday.

"As part of this deal Morocco will establish full diplomatic relations and resume official contacts with Israel. They will grant overflights and direct flights to and from Israel for all Israelis. They'll reopen liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv, immediately, with the intention to open the embassies in the near future," Kushner told reporters.

A key feature of the deal is the US' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara territory, which is contested by the Polisario Front, the movement behind the partially recognized Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Kushner explained that Morocco asserting control over the area was inevitable and an unnecessary roadblock for peace efforts in the region.

Trump's adviser added that Israeli and Moroccan officials will begin talks on economic cooperation as part of the deal.

Earlier in the day, Trump announced that he had brokered a peace deal between Israel and Morocco, the fourth Arab state to recognize Israel this year after the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

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**Kushner Says He Sees Normalizing Relations Between Israel, Saudi Arabia as Inevitable**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump's adviser Jared Kushner told reporters on Thursday that he sees the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as an inevitability.

"I do think that Israel and Saudi Arabia coming together and having full normalization at this point is an inevitability," Kushner said during a telephone briefing.

However, Kushner also said that the timeframe for normalizing relations is "something that has to be worked out."

Kushner spoke to reporters after Trump announced that he has brokered an agreement on establishing full diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco on the heels of similar deals with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

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**US Bans 17 Foreign Government Officials, Their Families From Entering US - Pompeo**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned 17 government officials in at least five nations for alleged violations of human rights, banning them and their family members from entering the United States, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the Department is announcing the public designation of 17 officials of foreign governments and their immediate family members under Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act 2020, as carried forward by the Continuing Appropriations Act 2021, due to the officials' involvement in gross violations of human rights," Pompeo said.

The sanctions prohibit named individuals and their immediate family members from the United States, Pompeo added.

Pompeo's named rights abusers in El Salvador, Jamaica and China, including police Chief Huang Yuanxiong in the southern Chinese city of Xiamen for persecuting the religious group Falun Gong.

A separate release from the Treasury Department expanded Pompeo's list to include new rights-related sanctions on Haiti and Russia.

The timing of the announcements coincides with Human Rights Day and officials have said the US government is making a deliberate effort to promote accountability for officials responsible for rights violations and abuses.



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**Israel, Morocco Agree to Establish Full Diplomatic Relations - Trump**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump announced on Thursday that he had brokered a peace deal between Israel and Morocco that involves the United States recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

"Another HISTORIC breakthrough today! Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations - a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!" Trump said via Twitter. "Morocco recognized the United States in 1777. It is thus fitting we recognize their sovereignty over the Western Sahara."

Morocco became the fourth Arab state to recognize Israel this year after the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

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**US Targets Kadyrov's Foundation, Chechen Officials in New Magnitsky Sanctions - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation and four Chechen officials, including Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, along with other persons and entities in Chechnya in a new round of Global Magnitsky Act sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

"In addition to Kadyrov, OFAC is designating the following six companies registered in Russia that continue to provide Kadyrov pride and significant profit: Absolute Championship Akhmat for being owned or controlled by Kadyrov, Akhmat MMA for being owned or controlled by Kadyrov, FC Akhmat Grozny for being owned or controlled by Kadyrov, Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation for being owned or controlled by Kadyrov," the release said.

Other sanctioned Chechen entities include Megastroyinvest and Chechen Mineral Waters Ltd.

"OFAC is also designating five individuals who are prominent members in Kadyrov's network: Vakhit Usmayev, the Deputy Prime Minister of Chechnya, has acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Kadyrov, Timur Dugazaev, a representative of Kadyrov in Europe, has acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Kadyrov," the Treasury continued.

Ziyad Sabsabi, a representative of Kadyrov, and Daniil Vasilievich Martynov, a personal security advisor for Kadyrov have also been sanctioned on Thursday.

Moreover, the sanctions were imposed on Satish Seemar, a horse trainer for Kadyrov.

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**Biden Picks Susan Rice to Head Domestic Policy Council - Transition Team**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden-Harris transition team said in a statement on Wednesday that US President-elect Joe Biden intends to name former Susan Rice to head the Domestic Policy Council - a significant deviation from her previous roles of a senior diplomat and National Security Advisor - in addition to four other domestic appointments and nominations.

Biden has also selected Tom Vilsack to be Agriculture Secretary, Marcia Fudge to be Housing and Urban Development Secretary, Denis McDonough to be Veterans Affairs Secretary and Katherine Tai to be US Trade Representative.

"Working families, veterans, farmers and producers, and those fighting for their place in the middle class will have partners in government once again," the transition team said via Twitter. "This experienced group will help us make it through this pandemic and thrive once the crisis is over."

In her new role, Rice will sit on the administration's COVID-19 Task Force, convene sessions with Cabinet secretaries, formulate and coordinate policies on education, labor, energy, veterans' affairs, housing, transportation, agriculture, the environment, conservation, opioid addiction, firearms, civil rights, voting rights and democratic governance, according to media reports.

During the Obama administration, Rice served as the US Ambassador to the United Nations and later as National Security Advisor.

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#### **US Enlists 3 Defense Firms to Make Drone Escorts for Manned Fighter Jets - Air Force**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States military has embarked on a project to create a fleet of drones to protect flanks of the nation's most advanced fighter jets, with contracts awarded to three big defense contractors, the US Air Force said in a press release on Thursday.

"Manned aircraft, such as this F-22 Raptor or F-35 Lightning II, could one day operate with autonomous attritable unmanned aircraft acting as wingmen. Air Force Life Cycle Management Center has contracted with three companies to produce missionized prototypes with the ability to fly in experimentation events," the release said.

Two-year contracts with a total value of nearly \$78 million were awarded to Boeing (\$25,748,180), General Atomics (\$14,317,933) and Kratos Unmanned Aerial Systems (\$37,771,577), the release added.

The contracts are part of a program named Skyborg Vanguard. The three companies are charged with delivering prototype drones within six months and for initial flight tests to begin in July 2021, according to the release.

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#### **US House Approves Legislation to Remove Confederate Statue From Antietam Battlefield**

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday adopted a legislation to remove a monument of Confederate General Robert Lee from the Antietam National Battlefield.

"The House passed on a voice vote H.R. 970," the House Press Gallery said via Twitter. The legislation directs the Secretary of the Interior to develop a plan for the removal of the monument "not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act." The statue should be "appropriately disposed," according to the text.

During the Civil War in the United States, Lee led the forces of the Confederacy - a group of southern states that believed the institution of slavery should be protected. Calls for the removal of monuments honoring Confederate figures have grown amid a nationwide anti-racism movement ignited by the May 25 death of African-American man George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis.

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## US Flies 2 B-52H Bombers over Persian Gulf to 'Deter Aggression' – CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) – A pair of US Air Force B-52H bombers flew over the Persian Gulf along with other US and allied aircraft in order to “deter aggression” in the region, United States Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a statement on Thursday.

“The short-notice, non-stop mission was designed to underscore the US military’s commitment to its regional partners, while also validating the ability to rapidly deploy combat power anywhere in the world,” the statement said. “While assuring allies and partners, the mission was also designed to deter aggression.”

The mission took place amid spiraling tensions between the US and Iran. Washington decided recently to withdraw almost half of its diplomats from Iraq amid concerns that Tehran might attempt to conduct high-profile assassinations.

“Potential adversaries should understand that no nation on earth is more ready and capable of rapidly deploying additional combat power in the face of any aggression,” CENTCOM commander Gen. Frank McKenzie said in the statement.

He underscored the readiness of the US and its allies to respond to any crisis and contingency in the region.

The US and its partners do not seek conflicts, but remain ready to deter any aggression, McKenzie added.

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## US Weekly Jobless Claims up 19%, Most Since Sept, As COVID-19 Bites - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Some 853,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 19 percent more than the previous week and the highest in a week since September, as US jobs recovery continued to worsen nine months into the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed on Thursday.

“In the week ending December 5, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 853,000,” the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to November 28 to 716,000 from a previously published 712,000. That raised the latest week’s claims by 137,000, or 19 percent — the most since the week ended September 26.

The spike in jobless claims is likely to put more urgency into lawmakers in Congress to agree on a fiscal package that could extend immediate aid to unemployed Americans.

Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March, dispensing roughly \$2.2 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

Since then, Democrats in the House of Representatives have been locked in a bitter debate with Republicans in the Senate on a successive relief plan to the CARES Act. The dispute has basically been over the size of the next stimulus, and who and what gets help. Meanwhile,

thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risk losing their jobs without further aid.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the pandemic. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month.

The US economy itself grew by 33.1 percent in the third quarter, after shrinking by 31.4 percent in the previous three months and 5 percent in the first quarter.

Notwithstanding the rebound, the economic outlook for the United States remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with more than 15 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 300,000 fatalities since January. Hospitalization has also hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine development efforts have been showing promise.

**This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

US Concerned About Bangladesh's Plans to Relocate 1,642 Rohingya Refugees - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is alarmed by Bangladesh's plans to transfer more than 1,600 Rohingya refugees to to Bhasan Char, and stresses the need for all relocations to be fully voluntary, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said in a statement on Thursday.

"The United States has long noted its appreciation for the Government of Bangladesh's commitment to hosting the Rohingya refugees but is concerned about the relocation of 1,642 Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char and plans to carry out further relocations," Brown said. "The United States concurs with the UN that any such relocations must be fully voluntary and based on informed consent without pressure or coercion."

Brown underscored that Washington is urging the Bangladesh government to abide by its pledge to allow Rohingya refugees return to camps on the mainland if they choose to do so. The State Department official also stressed that refugees on Bhasan Char should have access to livelihoods and basic services.

"With the UN and like-minded donors, the United States has asked for Bangladesh to accept the UN's offer of thorough and independent technical and protection assessments to determine the safety, feasibility, and desirability of relocating refugees there," he said. "Independent access to Bhasan Char will help to confirm whether refugees were relocated voluntarily and remain there voluntarily, and suitability of the site to withstand cyclones and seasonal flooding."

Brown added that Washington is calling on Burma to create the appropriate conditions for Rohingya refugees' voluntary and safe return.

"We encourage the Government of Bangladesh to continue coordinating with the international community to ensure funding for this crisis response and to work toward durable solutions in a

manner that is consistent with international norms and respects the human rights of each individual," Brown said.

The Bangladeshi government has planned to move as many as 100,000 Rohingya refugees from crowded camps to the 15 square mile island located 37 miles from the coast of the mainland. Rights groups have previously said that relocating Rohingya refugees to the island, away from the observation of humanitarian and protection groups, may amount to arbitrary detention.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, roughly 800,000 Rohingya refugees fled fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine State to Bangladesh from August 2017 to June 2019, amid fierce clashes between government forces and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, an insurgent group that operates in Rakhine State.

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US Military Targets Al-Shabab Explosives Experts in 2 Somalia Airstrikes - AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has conducted two airstrikes in Somalia aimed at eliminating Al-Shabab explosives experts, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) said in a press release on Thursday.

"In coordination with the Federal Government of Somalia, US Africa Command conducted two (2) airstrikes targeting al-Shabaab explosives experts in the vicinity of Jilib, Somalia, Dec. 10," the release said.

AFRICOM said its initial assessment indicates that the strike killed terrorists who were significantly involved in producing explosives for al-Shabaab.

"These devices are used frequently to target innocent civilians," the release noted. "Although initial assessment of impact is ongoing, it is assessed no civilians were injured or killed."



AFRICOM supports operations by Somali armed forces against al-Shabab, the East African affiliate of the al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia).

Al-Shabab is widely considered to be the most active affiliate of the al-Qaeda terror group.

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